

Testimony in Support of HB 221
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Chairman McNutt, members of the Committee, for the record my name is Kate Devino. I am the Public Policy Director at the Montana Food Bank Network.

In the seven years that I have worked at Montana Food Bank Network I have not seen a time of greater need than right now.

Currently the emergency food system in Montana is more strained than it has ever been. The reason is the current economy and lack of jobs. Poverty levels have increased in Montana to 15.1% in 2009. The Poverty level income for a family of four is \$1838 per month. USDA research shows until a family's income reaches 185% of poverty--\$3400 per month for a family of four—they are at risk of experiencing hunger. In Montana there are nearly 319,000 people (33.7%) living at or below this level.

The Montana Food Bank Network doesn't just give out food. One of the main goals is to help people to be self-sufficient. We understand that going from needing emergency food to being self-sufficient is a process—and this process includes making sure people have more stable sources of food.

Every other year, we conduct a survey of hunger among clients at emergency food pantries throughout Montana. We conduct one-on-one personal interviews with families coming to receive food boxes to learn more about the problems they deal with in trying to access adequate food. The study also helps us determine what the needs are and how to respond.

Families come to food pantries because they have nowhere else to turn. We know from conversations with over a 1,000 clients that people don't want to come to the food pantry for a handout. They want to be able to provide for their families on their own. People are ashamed, embarrassed and so grateful for the food they receive. We try to understand what people are going through when they need food. Many have lost a job or had hours cut back at work, many have medical expenses, and many simply cannot get by every month with limited or fixed income. It's rather emotional to hear people's stories. It's emotional on a personal level because most people are just like me, and probably not too dissimilar from any of us in this room. Hard working, smart, engaged citizens who were dealt a bad hand and have found themselves in need of something so fundamental and basic that they are beside themselves.

No one wants to rely on a food pantry. But nearly 150,000 Montanans have no other option.

Jobs are important to getting people back on their feet. Until Montanans have adequate jobs, the emergency food system needs to provide adequate food so that Montanans and their families don't go hungry.

The private sector cannot handle this massive job alone. We need to partner with the public sector.

Please vote to support the funding for emergency food in Montana during this very critical time of need.

Thank you,
Kate Devino